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East Timor and the United Kingdom: A Case Study of the Rhetoric and Reality of International Relations

In the 18th century, the philosopher Immanuel Kant distinguished between acting in accord with one's duty and acting out of duty. One can act in accord with one's duty without being praiseworthy, if it happens that one's duty coincides with one's truly motivating pragmatic interests. In determining whether an agent or an institution merits ethical praise, we do well to see whether, in cases where personal interest and duty diverge, the moral path is still taken.

Precisely because Indonesia-occupied East Timor offers such a case to the international community, it has become a moral testing ground for all states, North and South, East and West. The East Timorese have, in a sense, nothing going for them. They are neither White, like the Falklanders, nor are they Arab, like the Palestinians. In December 1975, the territory was invaded not by a Communist regime against which the U.S. was eager to score ideological points, nor by a capitalist country unfriendly, or geopolitically irrelevant, to the Soviet Union. The Timorese did not have the good fortune to be originally colonized by what is now a major world power, thereby likely earning its protection today, nor was it lucky enough to be

invaded by a nation for which Third World governments feel no allegiance, thereby likely securing their collective support. East Timor, in short, falls between the stools of international diplomacy. Few states, if any, have anything practical to gain from coming to the defense of its inhabitants. For this reason, observation of a nation's response to the ethnocidal cataclysm that has befallen the people of East Timor provides an invaluable lesson about the actual motivating forces in international relations.

Because I resided in the United Kingdom over the past few years, I undertook an examination of its actions in the face of Indonesia's aggression against East Timor -- or lack of actions. For Britain, in fact, turned its back on the East Timorese early on. In July 1975, as the Indonesians were preparing to invade the territory, the British Ambassador, Sir John Fox, urged the Foreign Office in London that "If it should come to the crunch and there is a row in the United Nations we should keep our heads down and avoid siding against the Indonesian Government." He went on to say this:

> One conclusion does seem to standout. ... The people of Portuguese Timor are in no condition to exercise their right to self-determination. ... Even without Soviet or Chinese intervention, the territory seems likely to become steadily more of a problem child, and the arguments for its integration into Indonesia are all the stronger. ... Certainly, as seen from here, it is in Britain's interest that Indonesia should absorb the territory as soon and as unobtrusively as possible.[1]

This "heads down" approach was indeed the one that the British Government adopted when the suffering of the "problem

child" was raised before the United Nations. On December 12, 1975, five days after the Indonesian invasion, the General Assembly voted on Resolution 3485 which

> strongly deplores the military intervention of the armed forces of Indonesia in Portuguese Timor ... [and] calls upon the Government of Indonesia to desist from further violations of the territorial integrity of Portuguese Timor and to withdraw without delay its armed forces from the Territory in order to enable the people of the Territory freely to exercise their right to self-determination.

This resolution was adopted with 72 votes to 10. There were 43 abstentions, including the U.S., Britain, and most of Western Europe.

Coming right after the invasion, this vote could have been of central importance in sending Indonesia the message that its suppliers in the West would not tolerate its illegal violence. As it went, the invaders did get the message: We of the civilized world were going to "keep our heads down" while Indonesia smothered the "problem child," with any luck "unobtrusively". As Lord Avebury, Chairman of the Parliamentary Human Rights Group, noted, "If at the time of the Indonesian invasion there had been anything like the outcry in the West which greeted the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Indonesian aggression might well have been halted. Western countries, after all, give Indonesia massive economic, military and diplomatic support." He added that "Far from diminishing since the invasion, the support has substantially increased."[2]

The seven following annual U.N. resolutions were similarly rendered toothless by regular and widespread abstentions and even

vetoes on the part of Indonesia's Western supporters. Britain, since 1976, has abstained on all resolutions calling for an act of self-determination for the people of East Timor. This shameful record has not prevented Britain's Foreign Secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, from declaring that "the people of East Timor deserve the opportunity to determine their own future in accordance with their own political aspirations, unaffected by pressures of one kind or another."[3] If the Indonesians were surprised to hear this, they could not be blamed; such remarks are intended essentially for domestic consumption.[4]

Britain and the West have supplied more than just diplomatic support to the Indonesian regime. In 1967, Western donor countries and international financial organizations formed the Inter-Governmental Group on Indonesia (IGGI) which has provided massive financial assistance (last year, for example, committing a record $3.15 billion). Currently, almost forty per cent of Indonesia's foreign exchange earnings are used to service an official debt of over $35 billion.

Britain's grants and loans to Indonesia are substantial and increasing. As one British executive put it recently, "We've got to start our own seduction games quickly."[5] From 1980-85 over £75 million in British aid has flowed into Indonesia.[6] British aid to Indonesia in 1984 alone exceeded £28 million, making it "the sixth largest recipient of British aid and the largest recipient outside the Commonwealth," according to the Government's Overseas Development Administration.[7]

These increases in aid are, to a considerable extent, intended to smooth the way for military contracts and to keep British arms manufacturers competitive with those in Europe, especially with the French and West Germans. In April 1978, under a Labor Government, British Aerospace (BA) signed a £25 million contract to supply the Indonesians with eight Hawk ground-attack/trainer aircraft. A BA official jubilantly commented: "The Indonesian contract is superb news ... . It is an important break-through into the South East Asia market, which is one of great potential."[8]

In the face of mounting alarm that the Government would grant export licences for the aircraft, then Foreign Secretary David Owen lamely insisted that "the sale does not include equipment for a ground attack role, and the aircraft cannot be used in East Timor or West Irian."[9] According to BA, however, though the Hawk's "attack capability attracts very little publicity, to many potential Hawk operators this is the first consideration." BA noted at the time that "where Hawks have been acquired in the training version only, they can be modified on site to the five pylon ground attack standard."[10] The British Government has been unable or unwilling to give assurances that no future equipment permitting such modifications will be sold, or that the Indonesians will not purchase the needed material elsewhere and modify the planes themselves. In any event, by providing such aircraft the British Government enables members of the Indonesian armed forces to acquire skills which it cannot

prevent from being used in the war against the East Timorese. Finally, Owen's assertion that such planes "cannot be used in East Timor" is rendered questionable by BA's claim that the Hawk is "an aircraft with worldwide market potential [which offers] full ground attack capability."[11] Owen insisted that the debate was academic anyway since "we believe that such fighting as continues [in East Timor] is on a very small scale."[12] Although in accord with Indonesian and U.S. statements at the time, this contradicted numerous reports from observers and human rights groups that documented the extreme savagery which took place from 1977 to early 1979 and which in fact reached its peak, according to Amnesty International, just a few months after Owen's assessment.[13] Needless to say, the Hawk deal went through and has been followed by many others. To date, BA has supplied the Indonesian military with at least seventeen Hawk aircraft.

By 1982, Britain had already sold $80 million worth of military equipment to the Indonesian generals and had become its fourth largest arms supplier (after the U.S., West Germany, and France).[14] Since December 1984, BA has also signed three substantial contracts worth £220 million for the supply of Rapier missiles, thereby bringing the total value of its sales to Indonesia since 1983 to £340 million.[15]

In 1984, Vosper-Thorneycroft signed a contract with Indonesia for the supply of three refitted naval frigates. These vessels, equipped with sophisticated surveillance hardware, are fast-moving warships. It is not difficult to see how they might

be useful in military operations against an island in parts most easily accessible by sea. The crucial role of Indonesia's navy in the illegal quarantine of East Timor should be obvious.

In short, the East Timorese are being subjugated with the machinery of war and repression provided by Britain and its allies.

In April 1985, Margaret Thatcher visited Indonesia during her tour of Asia. According to one news report at the time, the British Prime Minister "apparently did not press, the issue of East Timor." The report offers an explanation:

> Indonesia's arms market loomed particularly large in Britain's interests. British Aerospace won a £100 million contract at the end of last year for Rapier missiles and another defense contract of similar value is apparently under negotiation. The first of three Tribal class frigates built by Britain is due to arrive here next month and when the head of the Indonesian navy journeys later this month to Britain where some 200 Indonesians are undergoing naval training, he will be shown a large array of additional equipment, from ships to helicopters, which Britain is eager to sell.[16]

It might be remembered that a few years earlier, Thatcher had presented herself as a great defender of the universal right to self-determination. But that was rhetoric, reserved in practice for the Falklanders and discarded when no longer useful. The Prime Minister did declare during her trip that "Terrorism must never be seen to win. If it does it is the end of democracy."[17] But she was speaking in Sri Lanka, perhaps alluding to the Tamil separatists or even to the striking coal miners in Britain, but certainly not to Indonesia's then decade of state terrorism in East Timor. In Jakarta, Thatcher

inadvertently pinpointed the moral caliber of her Government and of its most articulate supporters: "Our cultures are diverse," she said to her Indonesian hosts, "but when it comes to defending independence and freedom we are at one with you."[18]

In conclusion, the test case of East Timor reveals exactly what any honest, open-eyed observer would have expected anyway: that when a state finds that its moral duty fails to coincide with its pragmatic interests, then it will pursue the latter without hesitation, while giving the former mere lip service.

Meanwhile the East Timorese, and the Indonesians who are forced to fight and support an unjust war, continue to suffer, and die, and wait for the sponsors finally to raise their heads.

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NOTES

1. Documents on Australian Defence and Foreign Policy, 1968-1975, J. R. Walsh and G. J. Munster, Hale and Iremonger (Sydney), 1980

2. Letter to The Times (London), July 7, 1980.

3. Quoted in The Times (London), April 9, 1985. The Times did not place this remark in the context of Britain's diplomatic abstentions, nor did Britain's newspaper of record bother to inform its readers of the nature of the "pressures" on the East Timorese to which the Foreign Secretary could have been alluding.

4. A recent official view of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee is that "Britain must continue to refuse to accept the forcible annexation of East Timor and reject Indonesian sovereignty until an agreement is reached with all parties, including genuine East Timorese representatives." House of Commons Paper 114, First Report, Session 1986-87, South East Asia and Indo-China, sec. 7, para. 158, p. xxxiii. It is difficult, however, to see in what way this commendable position is a "continuation" of Britain's dismal voting record at the United Nations.

5. The Financial Times (London), July 8, 1985.

6. The Financial Times (London), April 11, 1985.

7. "Britain pledges new £15 million aid to Indonesia," Overseas Development Administration, June 5, 1985.

8. Information, British Aerospace, April 5, 1978. Such assessments are by no means unusual: the Financial Times recently referred to Indonesia as "one of the development world's most attractive defence markets." November 11, 1987.

9. Letter to Sir Harold Wilson, June 22, 1978.

10. Hawk News, British Aerospace, No. 10, February 1979; Information, British Aerospace, April 5, 1978.

11. Information, British Aerospace, April 5, 1978. According to José Ramos-Horta, U.N. Representative of FRETILIN, "a number [of Hawks] have been used in East Timor. The Baukau International Airport, closed to civilian traffic and off-limits even to friendly foreign visitors, is the base for British `Hawk' aircraft as well as American OV-10 `Broncos' and French `Allouettes' and `Pumas'. From his Funu: The Unfinished Saga of East Timor, Red Sea Press, New Jersey, 1987, p. 145.

12. Letter to Moss Evans, November 21, 1978.

13. East Timor: Violations of Human Rights, Amnesty International Publications, London, pp. 29/30.

14. World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers: 1972-1982, U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, April 1984, p. 96. The figure given is cumulative from 1978-1982.

15. BBC Dispatch, Jakarta, February 14, 1987. Quoted in Tapol Bulletin (London), No. 84, December 1987, p. 9.

16. The Guardian (London), April 11, 1985.

17. The Guardian (London), April 13, 1985.

18. The Guardian (London), April 10, 1985.